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## Take a Look Around: An Analysis of Food Insecurity and Awareness on a College Campus

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TAKE A LOOK AROUND:  
AN ANALYSIS OF FOOD INSECURITY AND AWARENESS ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis  
Submitted in Partial fulfillment of  
University Honors Program requirements  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

By  
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## **Abstract**

The devastating hit from an unexpected global pandemic posed the question, who should we turn to? The opportunity of this thesis project motivated me to connect my passion for food and health with some source in the community around me. Not only did my own family and friends begin to struggle more with opportunities to work and provide, but many of my fellow university students did as well. I wanted to figure out how people on campus who were able, could physically participate in supporting those around them? The Husker Pantry on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln was brought to my attention, so I decided to study what they are all about. Eventually, I interviewed two of the women who help run the pantry to learn more about their mission, how the pantry has been impacted, and what their needs were in this time of struggle. They spoke to me of the increase in food insecurity and their passion to maintain integrity for students who utilized their resources. This led me to research more about what food insecurity is, how to maintain the integrity of students, and look into the awareness of this source for students and also their opportunity to support their classmates in need. I ended up conducting a donation drive within two willing sororities on campus and sending out a survey to get a better grasp of people's awareness of the Husker Pantry.

### **Key Words:**

- Food Insecurity: “a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life” (USDA, 2021)
- Awareness: “knowledge and understanding that something is happening and exists” (Merriam-Webster dictionary, 2021).
- Participation: “the fact of taking part, as in some action or attempt”

- Integrity: “an unimpaired condition, and the quality or state of being complete or undivided” (Merriam-Webster dictionary, 2021).

### **Dedication/Appreciation**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the Husker Pantry at UNL, in appreciation of their work to serve students in need while prioritizing relationships and the integrity of the students. I would also like to thank Professor Hortman for supporting my efforts to bring awareness to the food insecurity on the campus and creating a space for fellow students to participate in giving back to those around them. Lastly, I would like to thank my mother for drawing my attention to the Husker Pantry which inspired my ideas and motivation to make a difference in my community.

## **Take a Look Around:**

### **An Analysis of Food Insecurity and Awareness on a College Campus**

No one could have predicted what the year 2020 would bring to the world. As a new year began, many people were consumed in high hopes and aspirations as to what would come. Thoughts such as *this is going to be the best year yet*, or *I am going to make my dreams a reality this year*, or even *I am finally going to travel to Europe* were running through my head. Then come March, all of those thoughts were flipped on their head. The world was going to have to combat a global pandemic. Practically out of nowhere, people began to lose their jobs which were the source of their provision. No one could have guessed a year later we would still be in this drought, wearing masks and striving to stay connected with family and friends out of our reach.

The devastation of the COVID-19 global pandemic left no one out of its reach. The struggles it brought upon our “normal” lives came in many forms: isolation, emotional desolation, poverty, food insecurity, divisiveness, and many more. People, such as college students, who were already living paycheck-to-paycheck and skipping meals when they had to prioritize paying for rent over having lunch, were hit significantly as well. I am sure each person had their own mountain to climb, and I became aware of many fellow classmates struggling in similar ways. Our work hours were getting cut short or eliminated completely, rent became the main priority while groceries had to take a back seat, and there was no way to plan with no end in sight. Anxiety arose to new heights.

Luckily, the university presented the opportunity to apply for a grant to assist in the monetary struggles brought on by this unpredictable crisis. The COVID-19 relief fund was a ray

of light in the darkness. Funding support from students' parents was also not an option, in some cases, as they too were losing jobs and obtaining lower incomes.

I wanted to find a way to support the community around me in such difficult times with creating a Senior Project in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Honors Program. I believe my purpose as a human on this earth is to unite with the people around me to love, support, and serve them in any way I can. I did not want to make this solely about my personal efforts to make a change, instead I wanted to involve people around me who would be willing to participate. This inspired me to create a space and opportunity for people to come together after feeling so far apart from the isolation and separation brought on by the global pandemic.

The Husker Pantry on the UNL campus was brought to my attention by my mother, which led me to look deeper into their mission and services. I began to research their efforts, history, and opportunities for donations laid out on their website. I personally decided their institution could possibly line up with my ideal, socially engaged senior project creation, so I reached out to their suggested contact, Megan. When I emailed Megan, I presented her with my vision, and she agreed to work together in this process. This led to two zoom interviews: one with Megan, and one with her assistant Katie.

Megan has been working for the Husker Pantry for the past four years, which is associated with the Big Red Resilience office currently located in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Health Center. An amazing aspect of the pantry, is that it is an available resource for anyone who is enrolled in at least one credit hour at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The pantry has eleven donation bins across the UNL campuses. Their desire to serve as many students as possible is inspiring, and a difficult task. She informed me of the hits the Husker Pantry has faced due to the global pandemic. The CDC confirmed the global pandemic, and the

pantry had to close. Their closure proceeded through the month of June 2020, and they were able to open back up in July 2020. Of course, their services had to be adjusted in order to adhere to the established health and safety guidelines. This led them to the creation of a new service provided to the UNL students giving them the opportunity to order items online through their website for curbside pick-up. New avenues for donations were also produced, such as their Amazon wish-list and the option to monetarily donate through their website. It has still been difficult to provide for the students in need of this resource while this was another ray of light in the darkness.

Many people ventured home once classes became remote, and donations became even more scarce in a time of ultimate need for resources. The pantry wished to maintain the integrity of the pantry users, while still having the intense need for donation items. The open market model provided a new level of integrity for the students, as they were able to choose items themselves. The pandemic hit, lessening the integrity of the student experience and increasing their food insecurity. Megan informed me that currently about 30-35% of students on the UNL campus are food insecure and about 175 students utilize the online order and curbside pick-up opportunity at the time of the interview in February 2021. All of this considered, they were not able to take on more students at that time with the staff and donation shortages.

I also spoke over zoom with Katie who is a graduate assistant for the Student Affairs Program at UNL. She has been assisting Megan with the organization of donation drives and the production of the new donation avenues. A few of Katie's roles are to help students check-in, to keep inventory of the pantry, and organize the food drives that happen regularly across campus. This also includes collecting the donations from the bins across the UNL campuses. She was also played an integral role in the creation of the current process of curbside pick-up for the pantry.



Katie said there were about sixty to seventy orders placed each week at the beginning for the pick-up option from the data she has collected. Since students have come back to campus, the number increased from 100, 150, 170, and now about 175 orders per week. She has enjoyed creating relationships with the students who utilizes the pantry and has a desire to get rid of the stigma some may feel using the resource. Katie explained how some students may feel like they are not in enough need for the pantry, when in fact they are more than welcome to order curbside pick-up she wants the UNL students to know that the pantry is for any and every student.

The Husker Pantry also has the option for students to supply feedback from their experience and request items they desire. They have heard that the students appreciate the availability of the resource. Katie also explained that they are not always able to meet all of the item requests due to the lack of donations.

Once I gathered this information from interviewing both Megan and Katie, I looked deeper into the definitions of food insecurity and integrity. I found food insecurity to be defined as, “a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life” according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2021). I found the word integrity defined as, “an unimpaired condition, and the quality or state of being complete or undivided,” according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2021). I did not understand the relation of integrity with accepting food services at first. I now understand how a person would feel *less impaired* with the ability to choose exactly what they want from an open market, helping them feel more *complete* instead of divided in nature.

Once I completed my research, I asked Megan and Katie in what way I could best assist their needs. They simply needed increased donations. I wanted to honor their desires, while weaving in the creation of my Senior Project, and came to the conclusion of creating a donation

drive. I reached out to two sororities at UNL, Delta Gamma and Chi Omega, who were excited and willing to participate. This led to me facilitating a week of free-will donations from the members of the two sororities for a week. I provided them each with a donation bin from the Husker Pantry, the link to their Amazon wish-list, the link to their online monetary donation option, and a full list of the pantry's needed items. I chose to also send out a survey to promote awareness of the Husker Pantry and collect data to get a grasp of the students' current awareness.

The questions included:

- *Year at UNL*
- *Have you heard of Huskers Helping Huskers Food Pantry?*
- *If so, from where?*
- *Have you donated to this UNL Food Pantry?*
- *Would you consider donating?*

I received 103 responses from this survey. From those who responded: 46.6% were freshman, 22.3% were sophomores, 16.5% were juniors, and 14.6% were seniors. As for hearing about the pantry: 37.9% said no, and 62.1% said yes. The source of their knowledge came from: 47.6% word of mouth, 9.7% other sources, 4.5% their website, and 37.9% from this survey. Out of the 103 responses only 18.4% had previously donated to the pantry. I asked if they would consider donating, and 46.6% said they would through physical food donations, 26.2% said they would through both the Amazon wish-list and physical food donations, 9.7% would consider using the Amazon wish-list, 17.5% answered "maybe". I collected the data and dropped off the physical donations to the Husker Pantry at the Big Red Resilience office located in the UNL Health center on City Campus following the donation drive and responses from the survey.



Pictured: Donations from members of Delta Gamma at UNL.



Pictured: Donations from members of Chi Omega UNL.



Pictured: Allison dropping off the donations at the Big Red Resilience office located at the UNL Health Center.

Overall, I was able to fulfill my desire to create a space for opportunity and support in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln student community. I believe even events that seem quite simple can make some of the biggest differences when it comes to making a difference. The difference, in this case, was between students receiving sufficient provision or not. Reflecting upon the survey responses, I conclude it did in fact provide further awareness of the resource to students. It is important for students to be aware of the facility in order to both donate, utilize, and spread the word to others in need or wanting to give. I am grateful for the opportunity to assist the Huskers Helping Huskers Pantry in their efforts and for the seamless communication with their facilitators Megan and Katie. I believe we begin to change the world when we simply take a look around and help our own community.

### Citation List

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